

# The Deserter

## William Tenn

November 10, 2039—

*Terran Supreme Command communique No. 18-673 for the twenty-four hours ending 0900 Monday, Terran capital time:*

**...whereupon sector HQ** on Fortress Satellite Five ordered a strategic withdrawal of all interceptor units. The withdrawal was accomplished without difficulty and with minimal loss.

The only other incident of interest in this period was the surrender of an enemy soldier of undetermined rank, the first of these creatures from Jupiter to be taken alive by our forces. The capture was made in the course of defending Cochabamba, Bolivia, from an enemy commando raid. Four Jovians were killed in this unsuccessful assault upon a vital tin-supplying area after which the fifth laid down his arms and begged that his life be spared. Upon capture by our forces, the Jovian claimed to be a deserter and requested a safe-conduct to...

**Mardin had been briefed on what** to expect by the MP officer who'd escorted him into the cave. Inevitably, though, his first view of the tank in which the alien floated brought out a long, whimpering grunt of disbelief and remembered fear. It was at least sixty feet long by forty wide, and it reared off the rocky floor to twice the height of a man. Whatever incredible material its sides had been composed of had hours ago been covered by thick white layers of ice.

Cold air currents bouncing the foul, damp smell of methane back from the tank tweaked his nose and pricked at his ears. *Well, after all*, Mardin thought, *those things have a body temperature somewhere in the neighborhood of minus 2000 Fahrenheit!*

And he had felt this cold once before...

He shivered violently in response to the memory and zipped shut the fur-lined coveralls he'd been issued at the entrance. "Must have been quite a job getting that thing in here." The casualness of his voice surprised him and made him feel better.

"Oh, a special engineer task force did it in—let me see, now—" The MP lieutenant, a Chinese girl in her late teens, pursed soft, coral lips at his graying hair. "Less than five hours, figuring from the moment they arrived. The biggest problem was finding a cell in the neighborhood that was big enough to hold the prisoner. This cave was perfect."

Mardin looked up at the ledge above their heads. Every ten feet, a squad of three men, highly polished weapons ready for instant action. Atomic cannon squads alternating with men bent down under the weight of dem-dem grenades. Grim-faced young subalterns, very conscious of the bigness of the brass that occupied the platform at the far end of the cave, stamped back and forth along the ledge from squad to squad, deadly little Royster pistolettos tinkling and naked in their sweating hands. *Those kids*, he thought angrily, *so well adjusted to it all!*

The ledge ran along three sides of the cave; on the fourth, the low entrance from which Mardin had just come, he had seen five steel Caesars implanted, long, pointed snouts throbbingly eager to throw tremendous gusts of nuclear energy at the Jovian's rear. And amid the immense rock folds of the roof, a labyrinth of slender, pencil-like bombs had been laid, held in place by clamps that would all open simultaneously the moment a certain colonel's finger pressed a certain green button...

"If our friend in the tank makes one wrong move," Mardin muttered, "half of South America goes down the drain."

The girl started to chuckle, then changed her mind and frowned. "I'm sorry, Major Mardin, but I don't like that. I don't like hearing them referred to as 'friends.' Even in a joke. Over a million and a half people—three hundred thousand of them Chinese—have been wiped out by those—those ammoniated flatworms!"

"And the first fifty of which," he reminded her irritably, "were my relatives and neighbors. If you're old enough to remember Mars and the Three Watertanks Massacre, young lady."

She swallowed and looked stricken. An apology seemed to be in the process of composition, but Mardin moved past her in a long, disgusted stride and headed rapidly for the distant platform. He had a fierce dislike, he had discovered long ago, for people who were unable to hate wholesomely and intelligently, who had to jog their animus with special symbols and idiotic negations. Americans, during the War of 1914-18, changing sauerkraut into liberty cabbage; mobs of Turks, in the Gibraltar Flare-up of 1985, lynching anyone in Ankara caught eating oranges. How many times had he seen aged men in the uniform of the oldsters' service, the Infirm Civilian Corps, make the socially accepted gesture of grinding out a worm with their heels whenever they referred to the enemy from Jupiter!

He grimaced at the enormous expanse of ice-covered tank in which a blanket of living matter large enough to cover a city block pursued its alien processes. "Let me see you lift your foot and step on *that!*" he told the astonished girl behind him. *Damn all simplicity-hounds, anyway, he thought. A week on the receiving end of a Jovian question-machine is exactly what they need. Make them nice and thoughtful and give them some inkling of how crazily complex this universe can be!*

That reminded him of his purpose in this place. He became thoughtful himself and—while the circular scar on his forehead wrinkled—very gravely reminiscent of how crazily complex the universe actually was...

So thoughtful, in fact, that he had to take a long, relaxing breath and wipe his hands on his coveralls before climbing the stairs that led up to the hastily constructed platform.

Colonel Liu, Mardin's immediate superior, broke away from the knot of men at the other end and came up to him with arms spread wide. "Good to see you, Mardin," he said rapidly. "Now listen to me. Old Rockethead himself is here—you know how *he* is. So put a little snap into your salute and kind of pull back on those shoulders when you're talking to him. Know what I mean? Try to show him that when it comes to military bearing, we in Intelligence don't take a—Mardin, are you listening to me? This is *very* important."

With difficulty, Mardin took his eyes away from the transparent un-iced top of the tank. "Sorry, sir," he mumbled. "I'll—I'll try to remember."

"This the interpreter, Colonel Liu? Major Mardin, eh?" the very tall, stiffly erect man in the jeweled uniform of a Marshal of Space yelled from the railing. "Bring him over. On the double, sir!"

Colonel Liu grabbed Mardin's left arm and pulled him rapidly across the platform. Rockethead Billingsley cut the colonel's breathless introduction short. "Major *Igor* Mardin, is it? Sounds Russian. You wouldn't be Russian now, would you? I hate Russians."

Mardin noticed a broad-shouldered vice-marshal standing in Billingsley's rear stiffen angrily. "No, sir," he replied. "Mardin is a Croat name. My family is French and Yugoslav with possibly a bit of Arab."

The Marshal of Space inclined his fur-covered head. "Good! Couldn't stand you if you were Russian. Hate Russians, hate Chinese, hate Portuguese. Though the Chinese are worst of all, I'd say. Ready to start working on this devil from Jupiter? Come over here, then. And move, man, move!" As he swung around, the dozen or so sap-phire-studded Royster pistolettos that swung picturesquely from his shoulder straps clinked and clanked madly, making him seem like a gigantic cat that the mice had belled again and again.

Hurrying after him, Mardin noticed with amusement that the stiff, angry backs were everywhere now. Colonel Liu's mouth was screwed up into a dark pucker in his face; at the far end of the platform,

the young lieutenant who'd escorted him from the jet base was punching a tiny fist into an open palm. Marshal of Space Rudolfo Billingsley enjoyed a rank high enough to make tact a function of the moment's whim—and it was obvious that he rarely indulged such moments. "Head thick as a rocket wall and a mouth as filthy as a burned-out exhaust, but he can figure out, down to the smallest wound on the greenest corporal, exactly how much blood any attack is going to cost." That was what the line officers said of him.

And that, after all, Mardin reflected, was just the kind of man needed in the kind of world Earth had become in eighteen years of Jovian siege. He, himself, owed this man a very special debt...

"You probably don't remember me, sir," he began hesitantly as they paused beside a metal armchair that was suspended from an overhead wire. "But we met once before, about sixteen years ago. It was aboard your spaceship, the *Euphrates*, that I—"

"The *Euphrates* wasn't a spaceship. It was an interceptor, third class. Learn your damned terminology if you're going to dishonor a major's uniform, mister! And pull that zipper up tight. Of course, you were one of that mob of mewling civilians I pulled out of Three Watertanks right under the Jovians' noses. Let's see: that young archaeologist fellow. Didn't know then that we were going to get a real, first-class, bang-up, slaughter-em-dead war out of that incident, did we? Hah! You thought you had an easy life ahead of you, eh? Didn't suspect you'd be spending the rest of it in uniform, standing up straight and jumping when you got an order! This war's made men out of a lot of wet jellyfish like you, mister, and you can be grateful for the privilege."

Mardin nodded with difficulty, sardonically conscious of the abrupt stiffness of his own back, of the tightly clenched fingers scraping his palm. He wondered about the incidence of courts-martial, for striking a superior officer, in Billingsley's personal staff.

"All right, hop into it. Hop *in*, man!" Mardin realized the significance of the cupped hands being extended to him. A Marshal of Space was offering him a boost! Billingsley believed nobody could do *anything* better than Billingsley. Very gingerly, he stepped into it, was lifted up so that he could squirm into the chair. Automatically, he fastened the safety belt across his middle, strapped the headset in place.

Below him, Old Rockethead pulled the clamps tight around his ankles and called up: "You've been briefed? Arkhnatta contacted you?"

"Yes, I mean yes, *sir*. Professor Arkhnatta traveled with me all the way from Melbourne Base. He managed to cover everything, but of course it wasn't the detail he'd have liked."

"Hell with the detail. Listen to me, Major Mardin. Right there in front of you is the only Jovian flatworm we've managed to take alive. I don't know how much longer we can *keep* him alive—engineers are building a methane plant in another part of the cave so he'll have some stink to breathe when his own supply runs out, and the chemistry johnnies are refrigerating ammonia for him to drink—but I intend to rip every bit of useful military information out of his hide before he caves in. And your mind is the only chisel I've got. Hope I don't break the chisel, but the way I figure it you're not worth as much as a secondary space fleet. And I sacrificed one of those day before yesterday—complement of two thousand men—just to find out what the enemy was up to. So, mister, you pay attention to me and keep asking him questions. And shout out your replies good and loud for the recording machines. Swing him out, Colonel! Didn't you *hear* me? How the hell long does it take to swing him out?"

As the cable pulled the chair away from the platform and over the immense expanse of monster, Mardin felt something in his belly go far away and something in his brain try to hide. In a few moments—at the thought of what he'd be doing in a minute or two he shut his eyes tightly as he had in childhood, trying to wish the bad thing away.

He should have done what all his instincts urged way back in Melbourne Base when he'd gotten the orders and realized what they meant. He should have deserted. Only trouble, where do you desert in a world under arms, on a planet where every child has its own military responsibilities? But he should have done something. *Some-thing*. No man should have to go through this twice in one lifetime.

Simple enough for Old Rockethead. This was *his* life, negative as its goals were; moments like these of incipient destruction were the fulfillment for which he'd trained and worked and studied. He remembered something else now about Mar-shal of Space Billingsley. The beautiful little winged creatures of Venus—*Griggoddon*, they'd been called—who'd learned human languages and begun pestering the early colonists of that planet with hundreds of questions. Toleration of their high-pitched, ear-splitting voices had turned into annoyance and they'd been locked out of the settlements, whereupon they'd made the nights hideous with their curiosity, Since they'd refused to leave, and since the hard-working colonists found themselves losing more and more sleep, the problem had been turned over to the resident military power on Venus. Mardin recalled the uproar even on Mars when a laconic order of the day—"Venus has been rendered permanently calm: Commodore R. Billingsley."—announced that the first intelligent extraterrestrial life to be discovered had been destroyed down to the last crawling segmented infant by means of a new insecticide spray.

Barely six months later the attack on sparsely settled Mars had underlined with human corpses the existence of another intelligent race in the solar system—and a much more powerful one. Who remembered the insignificant *Griggoddon* when Commodore Rudolfo Billingsley slashed back into the enemy-occupied capital of Southern Mars and evacuated the few survivors of Jupiter's initial assault? Then the Hero of Three Watertanks had even gone back and rescued one of the men captured alive by the Jovian monsters—a certain Igor Mardin, proud possessor of the first, and, as it eventually turned out, also the only Ph.D. in Martian archaeology.

No, for Old Rockethead this horrendous planet-smashing was more than fulfillment, much more than a wonderful opportunity to practice various aspects of his trade: it represented reprieve. If mankind had not blundered into and alerted the outposts of Jovian empire in the asteroid belt, Billingsley would have worked out a miserable career as a police officer in various patrol posts, chained for the balance of his professional life to a commodore's rank by the *Griggoddon* blunder. Whenever he appeared at a party some fat woman would explain to her escort in a whisper full of highly audible sibilants that this was the famous Beast of Venus—and every uniformed man in the place would look uncomfortable. The Beast of Venus it would have been instead of the Hero of Three Watertanks, Defender of Luna, the Father of the Fortress Satellite System.

As for himself—well, Dr. Mardin would have plodded out the long years tranquilly and usefully, a scholar among scholars, not the brightest and best, possibly—here, a stimulating and rather cleverly documented paper, there, a startling minor discovery of interest only to specialists—but a man respected by his colleagues, doing work he was fitted for and liked, earning a secure place for himself in the text-books of another age as a secondary footnote or additional line in a bibliography. But instead the Popa Site Diggings were disintegrated rubble near the ruins of what had once been the human capital of Southern Mars and Major Igor Mardin's civilian skills had less relevance and value than those of a dodo breeder, or a veterinarian to mammoths and mastodons. He was now a mildly incompetent field-grade officer in an unimportant section of Intelligence whose attempts at military bearing and deportment amused his subordinates and caused his superiors a good deal of pain. He didn't like the tasks he was assigned; frequently he didn't even understand them. His value lay only in the two years of psychological hell he'd endured as a prisoner of the Jovians and even that could be realized only in peculiarly fortuitous circumstances such as those of the moment. He could never be anything but an object of pathos to the snappy, single-minded generation grown up in a milieu of no-quarter interplanetary war: and should the war end tomorrow with humanity, by some unimaginable miracle, victorious, he would have picked up nothing in the eighteen years of conflict but uncertainty about himself and a few doubtful moments for some drab little memoirs.

He found that, his fears forgotten, he had been glaring down at the enormous hulk of the Jovian rippling gently under the transparent tank-surface. This quiet-appearing sea of turgid scarlet soup in which an occasional bluish-white dumpling bobbed to the surface only to dwindle in size and disappear—this was one of the creatures that had robbed him of the life he should have had and had

hurled him into a by-the-numbers purgatory. And why? So that their own peculiar concepts of mastery might be maintained, so that another species might not arise to challenge their dominion of the outer planets. No attempt at arbitration, at treaty-making, at any kind of discussion—instead an overwhelming and relatively sudden onslaught, as methodical and irresistible as the attack of an anteater on an anthill.

A slender silvery tendril rose from the top of the tank to meet him and the chair came to an abrupt halt in its swaying journey across the roof of the gigantic cave. Mardin's shoulders shot up against his neck convulsively, he found himself trying to pull his head down into his chest—just as he had scores of times in the prison cell that had once been the Three Watertanks Public Library.

At the sight of the familiar questing tendril, a panic eighteen years old engulfed and nauseated him.

*It's going to hurt inside*, his mind wept, twisting and turning and dodging in his brain. *The thoughts are going to be rubbed against each other so that the skin comes off them and they hurt and hurt and hurt...*

The tendril came to a stop before his face and the tip curved interrogatively. Mardin squirmed back against the metal chair back.

*I wont! This time I don't have to! You can't make me—this time you re our prisoner—you can't make me—you can't make me—*

"Mardin!" Billingsley's voice bellowed in his headphones. "Put the damn thing on and let's get going! Move, man, *move!*"

And almost before he knew he had done it, as automatically as he had learned to go rigid at the sound of *attenshun!* Mardin's hand reached out for the tendril and placed the tip of it against the old scar on his forehead.

There was that anciently familiar sensation of inmost rapport, of new-found completeness, of belonging to a higher order of being. There were the strange double memories; a river of green fire arching off a jet-black trembling cliff hundreds of miles high, somehow blending in with the feel of delighted shock as Dave Weiner's baseball hit the catcher's mitt you'd gotten two hours ago for a birthday present; a picture of a very lovely and very intent young female physicist explaining to you just how somebody named Albert Fermi Vannevar derived  $E=mc^2$ , getting all confused with the time to begin the many-scented dance to the surface because of the myriad of wonderful soft spots you could feel calling to each other on your back.

But, Mardin realized with amazement in some recess of autonomy still left in his mind, this time there was a difference. This time there was no feeling of terror as of thorough personal violation, there was no incredibly ugly sensation of tentacles armed with multitudes of tiny suckers speeding through his nervous system and feeding, feeding, greedily feeding... This time none of his thoughts were dissected, kicking and screaming, in the operating theater of his own skull while his ego shuddered fearfully at the bloody spectacle from a distant psychic cranny.

This time he was *with*—not *of*.

Of course, a lot of work undoubtedly had been done on the Jovian question-machine in the past decade. The single tendril that contained all of the intricate mechanism for telepathic communion between two races had probably been refined far past the coarse and blundering gadget that had gouged at his mind eighteen years ago.

And, of course, this time *he* was the interrogator. This time it was a Jovian that lay helpless before the probe, the weapons, the merciless detachment of an alien culture. This time it was a Jovian, not Igor Mardin, who had to find the right answers to the insistent questions—and the right symbols with which to articulate those answers.

All that made a tremendous difference. Mardin relaxed and was amused by the feeling of power that roared through him.

Still—there was something else. This time he was dealing with a totally different personality.

There was a pleasant, undefinable quality to this individual from a world whose gravity could smear Mardin across the landscape in a fine liquid film. A character trait like—no, not simple tact—certainly not timidity—and you couldn't just call it gentleness and warmth—

Mardin gave up. Certainly, he decided, the difference between this Jovian and his jailer on Mars was like the difference between two entirely different breeds. Why, it was a pleasure to share part of his mental processes temporarily with this kind of person! As from a distance, he heard the Jovian reply that the pleasure was mutual. He felt instinctively they had much in common.

And they'd have to—if Billingsley were to get the information he wanted. Superficially, it might seem that a mechanism for sharing thoughts was the ideal answer to communication between races as dissimilar as the Jovian and Terrestrial. In practice, Mardin knew from long months of squeezing his imagination under orders in Three Watertanks, a telepathy machine merely gave you a communication potential. An individual thinks in pictures and symbols based on his life experiences—if two individuals have no life experiences in common, all they can share is confusion. It had taken extended periods of desperate effort before Mardin and his Jovian captor had established that what passed for the digestive process among humans was a combination of breathing and strenuous physical exercise to a creature born on Jupiter, that the concept of taking a bath could be equated with a Jovian activity so shameful and so overlaid with pain that Mardin's questioner had been unable to visit him for five weeks after the subject came up and thenceforth treated him with the reserve one might maintain toward an intelligent blob of fecal matter.

But mutually accepted symbols eventually had been established—just before Mardin's rescue. And ever since then, he'd been kept on ice in Intelligence, for a moment like this...

"Mardin!" Old Rockethead's voice ripped out of his earphones. "Made contact yet?"

"Yes. I think I have, sir."

"Good! Feels like a reunion of the goddamn old regiment, eh? All set to ask questions? The slug's cooperating? Answer me, Mardin! Don't sit there gaping at him!"

"Yes, sir," Mardin said hurriedly. "Everything's all set."

"Good! Let's see now. First off, ask him his name, rank and serial number,"

Mardin shook his head. The terrifying, straight-faced orderliness of the military mind! The protocol was unalterable; you asked a Japanese prisoner-of-war for his name, rank and serial number; obviously, you did the same when the prisoner was a Jovian! The fact that there was no interplanetary Red Cross to notify his family that food packages might now be sent...

He addressed himself to the immense blanket of quiescent living matter below him, phrasing the question in as broad a set of symbols as he could contrive. Where would the answer be worked out, he wondered? On the basis of their examination of dead Jovians, some scientists maintained that the creatures were really vertebrates, except that they had nine separate brains and spinal columns; other biologists insisted that the "brains" were merely the kind of ganglia to be found in various kinds of invertebrates and that thinking took place on the delicately convoluted surface of their bodies. And no one had ever found anything vaguely resembling a mouth or eyes, not to mention appendages that could be used in locomotion.

Abruptly, he found himself on the bottom of a noisy sea of liquid ammonia, clustered with dozens of other newborn around the neuter "mother." Someone flaked off the cluster and darted away; he followed. The two of them met in the appointed place of crystallization and joined into one individual. The pride he felt in the increase of self was worth every bit of effort.

Then he was humping along a painful surface. He was much larger now—and increased in self many times over. The Council of Unborn asked him for his choice. He chose to become a male. He was directed to a new fraternity.

Later, there was a mating with tiny silent females and enormous, highly active neuters. He was given

many presents. Much later, there was a songfest in a dripping cavern that was interrupted by a battle scene with rebellious slaves on one of Saturn's moons. With a great regret he seemed to go into suspended animation for a number of years. *Wounded?* Mardin wondered. *Hospitalized?*

In conclusion, there was a guided tour of an undersea hatchery which terminated in a colorful earthquake.

Mardin slowly assimilated the information in terms of human symbology.

"Here it is, sir," he said at last hesitantly into the mouthpiece. "They don't have any actual equivalents in this area, but you might call him Ho-Par XV, originally of the Titan garrison and sometime adjutant to the commanders of Ganymede." Mardin paused a moment before going on. "He'd like it on the record that he's been invited to reproduce five times—and twice in public."

Billingsley grunted. "Nonsense! Find out why he didn't fight to the death like the other four raiders. If he still claims to be a deserter, find out why. Personally, I think these Jovians are too damn fine soldiers for that sort of thing. They may be worms, but I can't see one of them going over to the enemy."

Mardin put the question to the prisoner...

Once more he wandered on worlds where he could not have lived for a moment. He superintended a work detail of strange dustmotes, long ago conquered and placed under Jovian hegemony. He found himself feeling about them the way he had felt about the *Griggoddon* eighteen years ago; they were too wonderful to be doomed, he protested. Then he realized that the protest was not his, but that of the sorrowing entity who had lived these experiences. And they went on to other garrisons, other duties.

The reply he got this time made Mardin gasp. "He says all five of the Jovians were deserting! They had planned it for years, all of them being both fraternity-brothers and brood-brothers. He says that they—well, you might say *parachuted* down together—and not one of them had a weapon. They each tried in different ways, as they had planned beforehand, to make their surrender known. Ho-Par XV was the only successful one. He brings greetings from clusters as yet unsynthesized."

"Stick to the facts, Mardin. No romancing. Why did they desert?"

"I am sticking to the facts, sir: I'm just trying to give you the flavor as well as the substance. According to Ho-Par XV, they deserted because they were all violently opposed to militarism."

"*Wha-at?*"

"That, as near as I can render it, is exactly what he says. He says that militarism is ruining their race. It has resulted in all kinds of incorrect choices on the part of the young as to which sex they will assume in the adult state (I don't understand that part at all myself, sir)—it has thrown confusion into an art somewhere between cartogra-phy and horticulture that Ho-Par thinks is very important to the future of Jupiter—and it has weighed every Jovian down with an immense burden of guilt because of what their armies and military administration have done to alien life-forms on Ganymede, Titan and Europa, not to mention the half-sentient bubbles of the Saturnian core."

"To hell with the latrine-blasted half-sentient bubbles of the Saturnian core!" Billingsley bellowed.

"Ho-Par XV feels," the man in the suspended metal armchair went on relentlessly, staring down with delight at the flat stretch of red liquid whose beautifully sane, delicately balanced mind he was paraphrasing, "that his race needs to be stopped for its own sake as well as that of the other forms of life in the Solar System. Creatures trained in warfare are what he calls 'philosophically anti-life.' The young Jovians had just about given up hope that Jupiter *could* be stopped, when humanity came busting through the asteroids. Only trouble is that while we do think and move about three times as fast as they do, the Jovian females—who are the closest thing they have to theoretical scientists—know a lot more than we, dig into a concept more deeply than we can imagine and generally can be expected to keep licking us as they have been, until we are either extinct or enslaved. Ho-Par XV and his brood-brothers decided after the annual smelling session in the Jovian fleet this year to try to change all this. They felt that with our speedier metabolism, we might be able to take a new weapon, which the Jovians have barely got into

production, and turn it out fast enough to make a slight—"

At this point there was a certain amount of noise in the headphones. After a while, Old Rockethead's voice, suavity gone, came through more or less distinctly:"—and if you don't start detailing that weapon immediately, you mangy son of a flea-bitten cur, I will have you broken twelve grades below Ordinary Spaceman and strip the skin off your pimply backside with my own boot the moment I get you back on this platform. I'll personally see to it that you spend all of your leaves cleaning the filthiest latrines the space fleet can find! Now jump to it!"

Major Mardin wiped the line of sweat off his upper lip and began detailing the weapon. *Who does he think he's talking to? his mind asked bitterly. I'm no kid, no apple-cheeked youngster, to be snapped at and dressed down with that line of frowzy, ugly, bar-racks-corporal humor! I got a standing ovation from the All-Earth Archaeological Soci-ety once, and Dr. Emmanuel Hozzne himself congratulated me on my report.*

But his mouth began detailing the weapon, his mouth went on articulating the difficult ideas which Ho-Par XV and his fellow deserters had painfully translated into faintly recognizable human terms, his mouth dutifully continued to explicate math-ematical and physical concepts into the black speaking cone near his chin.

His mouth went about its business and carried out its orders—but his mind lay agonized at the insult. And then, in a corner of his mind where tenancy was joint, so to speak, a puzzled, warm, highly sensitive and extremely intelligent personality asked a puzzled, tentative question.

Mardin stopped in mid-sentence, overcome with horror at what he'd almost given away to the alien. He tried to cover up, to fill his mind with memories of content-ment, to create *non-sequiturs* as psychological camouflage. What an idiot to forget that he wasn't alone in his mind!

And the question was asked again. *Are you not the representative of your people? Are—are there others...unlike you?*

*Of course not!* Mardin told him desperately. *Your confusion is due entirely to the fun-damental differences between Jovian and Terrestrial thinking—*

"Mardin! Will you stop drooling out of those near-sighted eyes and come the hell to attention? Keep talking, chowderhead, we want the rest of that flatworm's brain picked!"

*What fundamental differences?* Mardin asked himself suddenly, his skull a white-hot furnace of rage. There were more fundamental differences between someone like Billingsley and himself, than between himself and this poetic creature who had risked death and become a traitor to his own race—to preserve the dignity of the life-force. What did he have in common with this Cain come to judgment, this bemedaled swaggering boor who rejoiced in having reduced all the subtleties of conscious thought to rigidly simple, unavoidable alternatives: kill or be killed! damn or be damned! be powerful or be overpowered! The monster who had tortured his mind endlessly, dis-passionately, in the prison on Mars would have found Old Rockethead much more of a friend than Ho-Par XV.

*That is true, that is so!* The Jovian's thought came down emphatically on his mind. *And now, friend, brood-brother, whatever you may choose to call yourself, please let me know what kind of creature I have given this weapon to. Let me know what he has done in the past with power, what he may be expected to do in hatching cycles yet to come. Let me know through your mind and your memories and your feelings—for you and I under-stand each other.*

Mardin let him know.

...to the nearest legal representative of the entire human race. As the result of pre-liminary interrogation by the military authorities a good deal was learned about the life and habits of the enemy. Unfortunately, in the course of further question-ing, the Jovian evidently came to regret being taken alive and opened the valves of the gigantic tank which was his space suit, thus committing suicide instantly and incidentally smothering his human interpreter in a dense cloud of methane gas. Major Igor Mardin, the interpreter, has been posthumously awarded the Silver Lunar Circllet with doubled jets. The Jovian's suicide is now being studied



by space fleet psychologists to determine whether this may not indicate an unstable mental pattern which will be useful to our deep-space armed forces in the future...

### **Afterword**

**"The Deserter" is by way** of being a small monument to my father, Aaron-David Klass, who was a minor Socialist Party official in the England of 1914. When all the socialist parties of Europe dishonored their pre-1914 pledges to call an international general strike and never to vote for war credits in case of war, my father took it upon his five-foot, two-inch self to right the balance.

He published signed manifestoes declaring that his conscience would not let him do other than publicly desert if he were drafted. He urged all other workingmen to do the same.

He was drafted.

He publicly deserted.

He was found and brought back in chains for a court martial. After escaping, through the help of rank-and-file socialists who also had been drafted and who had attended his lectures, he spent the balance of the war in a windowless attic room, writing highly subversive pacifist pamphlets. He eventually fled to the United States, entering it as an illegal alien, a status that was not changed until 1945—when his son was drafted for another war.

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